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ABSTRACT

The insights of 12 foreign scholars and language scientists into the battle over making English the "de jure" official language of the United States are presented. The opinions come from England, Canada, the Philippines, the People's Republic of China, Australia, Belgium, India, and the Federal Republic of Germany. The consensus of these commentators is that making English an official language for the United States would be superfluous and unnecessary, and that those who are trying to do so have hidden agendas that are being masked by the language question. A possible compromise to the problem is suggested. (Author/MSE)

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ABSTRACT

Foreign Reactions to American Concerns

About the English Only Amendment

Insights about the battle over making English the "de jure" official language of the United States are presented by twelve foreign scholars and language scientists from England, Canada, The Philippines, The People's Republic of China, Australia, Belgium, India and the Federal Republic of Germany. The overwhelming consensus of these commentators is that making English an official language for the United States would be superfluous and unnecessary and that those who are trying to do so may have hidden agendas being masked by the language question. A possible compromise to the problem is suggested.

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Foreign Reactions to American Concerns About the English Only Amendment

As the battle lines become clearly drawn for the confrontation over language rights in the United States, it is interesting to turn to foreign observers to see their reactions to our conflict over what we speak. These insights give us pause and promise, praise and sometimes posturing, but each provides us an interesting view of how sociolinguists in other countries react to American problems, and for us all, it is always valuable "to see ourselves as others see us."

Tom McArthur is editor of English Today, a world-wide journal published in Cambridge, England; part of his comments, excerpted, were:

> Unease about language is almost always symptomatic of a larger unease. (McArthur 1986, 87)
>
> . . . . . .
>
> They [the English Only enthusiasts] would appear to be part of the English-language establishment of the U.S.A., beneficiaries of the economic clout of the most powerful republic on earth and also legatees of the British diaspora. Such an establishment--identified as much by attitude, education, and social ritual as by 'race' per se--would appear to be invulnerable.
>
> Apparently, however, it is not, or at least some of its members do not perceive it as invulnerable. They are not so bent on defending the circle of wagons as, say, Afrikaners in the laager of

South Africa, but they have their worries. The 'melting pot' metaphor always referred to their melting pot. . . . Never in the history of the United States was there any intention of anybody melting into one homogeneous soup with the Sioux and the Iroquois, the descendents of African slave populations, the Latins, or anybody else. The heartland psychology of 'Middle America' is summed up well in the Chicano word 'Anglo' and the acronym 'WASP'. WASPs and their asimilados (like the 'brown sahibs' of India and the 'Afro-Saxons' of Africa) are like heartland French disdaining the Basques, the Bretons, and the Corsicans, or heartland English shaking their heads at the dubious ways of the Welsh and Irish.

The languages in question are just one kind of badge: it is the heartland or core assumptions that matter. Such 'heartlanders' (physically in Indiana, psychologically in California) have never felt the need to make English the official language of the United States in response to the agitation of the French in Maine, angry Injuns at Wounded Knee, aggrieved Hawaiians, or any other tiny minority. They only defend the tool called English (about which they are otherwise entirely pragmatic) when it is threatened by the one other linguistic tool that signifies in the Americas, the tool used in Puerto Rico, Mexico, Cuba, Dominica, Honduras, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala, Costa Rica, Panama, Ecuador, Venezuela, Peru, Columbia, Uruguay, Paraguay, Chine, and Argentina.

The border is porous to the south. Its equal porosity to the north is irrelevant; there is no threat from the north, where Canada's few millions, even if they speak French, are manageable. But the millions of Hispanics down there are not manageable. The

> concern that Anglo-America could be swamped by Hispano-America is comparable to the fear that French America (Quebec) could be swamped by English America (the rest of Canada plus the States) and is not unlike the perennial fears in 'white' Australia that one day the Yellow Peril will come (now called 'Asianization').
>
> The Hispanic issue is complicated by the fact that Latin America is largely part of a 'Third World' while many Americans see themselves as the great bastion of the never-stated 'First World.' It happens that Spanish is the language of masses perceived variously as illiterate, impoverished, dirty, backward, criminally inclined, residually Roman Catholic, prone to Communist infiltration, dark-complexioned, and now pushing cocaine and marijuana north for all they are worth.
>
> There does not have to be much rationality in the response to such fears, but it can help to make fears tidy and manageable if one talks in an apparently rational manner about the Constitution and safeguarding the nation's language--English, the preeminent language tool of the First World. Some of the Gringos would appear to be praising the Lord and keeping their linguistic power dry, in preparation of some kind of Alamo.(McArthur 1986, 90-91)

Manfred Görlach, professor at the University of Cologne, Federal Republic of Germany, is editor of English World-Wide, a global journal devoted to study of various types of Englishes and their research; he began his following excerpted comments with a little joke:

> 'What do you call a person that speaks two languages?'
>
> 'Bilingual.'
>
> 'And one that speaks only one?'

'American.'

. . . . . .

A national language? The Americans apparently did not need one when in 19th-century Europe linguistic boundaries were made into national frontiers, and the principle of 'one people--one nation' proved one of the most influential concepts involved in the unification or breaking away (as the case may be) of territorial units.

From whatever angle one looks at the problems, there is no doubt that Americans (that is, citizens of the United States) have become more monolingual generation after generation and have thus fulfilled to a most impressive extent their motto E pluribus unum on the linguistic level. . . .(Görlach 1986, 98)

. . . . . .

In spite of frequent (partisan) rumors to the contrary, the present state of English in the U.S. appears . . . to be less endangered than ever. . . .(Görlach 1986, 99)

. . . . . .

If the U.S. is, then, a monolingual country (with 96% of its inhabitants reported to speak English as their first or second language), would it be consistent to regulate by law what has been brought about by language shifts, and declare English the national language?(Görlach 1986, 99)

. . . . . .

The conclusions for American society (and others, too) are clear; with language shift going on all the time (and most

> dramatically affecting, contrary to popular myth, speakers of Spanish, too) the melting pot is still working, perhaps even more efficiently (with increased mobility) than it has in some areas in the rural days of old. An ELA is not needed; it could . . . work the other way by adding to the feelings of discrimination against non-Anglos. As long as English competence means that the speaker stands a chance of being accepted as equal in American society, the social motivation to master it, and master it with grace and skill, will so predominate that non-English language maintenance is likely, in most communities, to be relegated to the mostalgic niches of folklore, and non-English language maintenance will then be of no greater danger to the American way of life than chow-mein, smorgasbord, sauerkraut, paella, or macaroni are to the American menu. It has been clear for some time that bilingual education means greater proficiency in the majority's language, in particular, and the best way to achieve assimilation through language shift is to provide such educational opportunities; ironically enough, this satisfies the demands of minority groups at the same time. . . . (Görlach 1986, 100f.)

From Europe we can turn to Asia to hear excerpts from comments made by Tan Hu of the Central Institute of Nationalities, Beijing, People's Republic of China; Professor Hu wrote:

> According to experiences in our Chinese history, in a multilingual country, the policy of equality among different nationalities, mutual respect, and mutual learning are most conducive to the unity of all nationalities and social development. China has 56 nationalities

> and dozens of languages. The majority of the population is Han, amounting to over a billion people. The other nationalities have more than 60 million people. Before 1949, the 'official language,' based on the Beijing dialect, was selected to be the national language to be used throughout the country; the rights of the minority languages were not recognized. After 1949, the new Chinese government decided to adopt the northern dialect based on Beijing pronunciation as the common language, and the rights of the minority languages were protected. Our constitution says clearly that in China 'all nationalities have the right to use and develop their own languages and writing systems.' In minority communities, schools in which their own languages are used as the languages of instruction were established. . . . My impression is that in the United States, the minority groups and languages of immigrants have not posed a major threat to the English language spoken by 96% of the population. Therefore, paying more attention to the rights of minority languages would definitely be a wise choice. (Tan Hu 1986, 116)

One of the most noted scholars of the languages of India, E. Annamali, director of the Central Institute of Indian Languages, Mysore, made several insightful comments on the language problems of the U.S. as compared to India; excerpts from his comments provide a unique perspective for viewing our conflict:

> It is the belief of some planners in India, faced with the opposition to Hindi as the official language of the Union, that the question of the official language should have been left by the framers of the Indian Constitution to a course of natural selection as was done in

> the U.K. and the U.S.A. . . . [T]he question of an official language can be opened up any time by changes in the social organization and ideology. The widespread enthusiasm for Hindi as a symbol of nationalism during the freedom movement waned after Independence, and suspicions of unequal opportunities and benefits gained ground and political overtones at the time of the socio-economic reconstruction of the country. The English Language Amendment in the U.S., to declare English as its official language, is a reaction to the perceived growth of multilingualism and increase in the demands for language rights. It is an expression of neo-patriotism and a fear of corrosion of American culture and political integration . . . [T]hese [fears] are not based on facts, but perceptions are not always rational . . . [P]olitical unrest in India and some other countries is not because of recognition and acceptance of multilingualism, but because of denial of language rights to minorities.(Annamali 1986, 145)
>
> . . . . . .
>
> The social philosophy embodied in the Indian Constitution is one of preservation of multilingualism and multiculturalism with protection for linguistic minorities from discrimination on the basis of language.(Annamali 1986, 146)
>
> . . . . . .
>
> The question then is whether there can be official sanction for the use of any language for specific purposes without official status for it. I believe that this is possible and may derive from other rights, such as cultural, religious, and educational rights,

> or by convention, which is as respected as are the customary laws. It is from this point of view that the claims of various Indian languages to be included in the schedule of Indian languages for constitutional status are not encouraged. In the same way, it may not be necessary in the U.S. to confer the status of official language upon English to safeguard its supremacy nor to confer official status upon minority languages to protect their rights of use.(Annamali 1986, 150)

A Canadian perspective is provided by Eric Maldoff, former president of the Alliance Quebec; these excerpts of his views from Montreal provide some major insights from our northern neighbor, whose history has continuously been marked by struggle for language rights:

> Is the situation in the United States such that it justifies embarking on the slippery slope of constitutional recognition of an official language? Are there no other, more sensitive and flexible means to address the concerns, once they have been clearly identified and stated?
>
> [F]rom a Canadian perspective a strong note of caution must be sounded with respect to the ELA debate. One must seriously assess the objectives of such an initiative and its consequences and implications in both the short and long terms. One must also consider very carefully the effect of an ELA on American political culture and philosophy. The adopting of the ELA could open the door to an unprecedented degree of government intervention in the lives of Americans and a major new thrust in the field of social engineering. Is this required, justified, or desired? There is much

to be learned from the Canadian experience. It seems that many will be surprised by what they discover. The ELA will not be the final step; it will undoubtedly be the first step on what may be a long and treacherous road.(Maldoff 1986, 114)

Belgium is often cited as a prime example of the divisions that language conflict can produce, thus it is interesting to look at excerpts from comments by Hugo Baetens Beardsmore and Roland Willemyns, sociolinguists who teach at the Vrije Universiteit, Brussels:

> When one examines the arguments put forward by the proponents of the English Language Amendment, one is struck by the fact that the language issue seems to be masking something far more fundamental, and that language is being used as a scapegoat. It seems apparent that what is really at issue is a fear of the consequences of massive immigration of a type not previously encountered. Previous immigration . . . has been mainly from white and therefore not readily identifiable European stock, whereas present-day immigration tends to come from nonwhite, markedly culturally-distinct African and Asian groups in Europe, Latin-American or Asian groups in the United States. The difficulties of cultural assimilation of these recent waves of immigrants may disturb certain sectors of the indigenous population, yet linguistic and cultural problems resulting from former waves of immigration have been overcome and no longer cause problems. The reason why more recent immigration . . . arouses fears is due to its tendency to concentrate in specific areas, together with its more visible impact, if only because of skin color, so that predictions that California will comprise over 50% of

> Spanish speakers by the turn of the century may come across as a potential threat. Concentrations of highly distinctive immigration populations often provoke hostile reactions from the so-called original population, and it requires well-balanced consideration to establish some policy which will neither frighten the original population nor hamper the immigrant population from achieving the same opportunities as the forerunners. Such considerations need to take into account not only social, economic, and political levels, but equally linguistic and cultural elements.(Baetens Beardsmore and Willemyns 1986, 121f.)
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Since cultural attributes are not as easily identifiable as linguistic differences, it is the language question that often serves as the stick with which to beat immigrants into conformity. (Baetens Beardsmore and Willemyns 1986, 123)
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Seen in this light, we would contend that the English Language Amendment is superfluous in the United States context, and . . . potentially disruptive. The amendment appears superfluous to us because English is obviously an overarching core value . . . English as an overarching core value is an unstated assumption of American civilization. Legislation clarifying this point unnecessarily may well go counter to individual groups' core values which enable them to maintain their hyphenated American identity, Jewish-American, Greek-American, or whatever, thereby impeding integration into the mainstream acceptance of the overarching core values. Finally, the

> amendment appears unnecessary in that the statistical significance of English throughout the United States, its supremacy as a world language, and its economic significance as linguistic capital in the marketplace of life will quite naturally bring about what the amendment proposes. We therefore concur entirely . . . about leaving well enough alone, on the assumption based on cases from all over the world, that time and intergenerational language shift will achieve the same effect as the amendment without unnecessary provocation. Belgium's chequered history of linguistic legislation has shown that once one starts to legislate, there is no knowing where one has to stop.(Baetens Beardsmore and Willemyns 1986, 126f.)

Michael Clyne, a sociolinguist teaching and researching at Monash University, provided an Australian perspective; excerpts from his comments give us a view of concerns from "down under":

> It may be that the U.S. has tried to be 'too pluralistic' in its language policies and that the 'official language' question is part of an inevitable backlash. There are three points which arise . . . that I would support from the Australian context--the need for an integrated national language policy developed by a broadly based National Commission for Language Policy [now extant in Australia but not in the United States]; the need to see (and widely project) English and the other American languages as complimentary and not in conflict; and the need to develop bilingualism as a national asset. . . . After all, the 'majority minority' language of the U.S. [Spanish] is, at the same time, a major international language, the language of the southern neighbors, and a major

foreign language in schools.(Clyne 1986, 142)

Professor Bonifacio P. Sibayan of Philippine Normal College, Manila, was honored as the outstanding social scientist in The Philippines in 1986; excerpts from his comments provide unique insights from a land where multilingualism often has political and sometimes militant consequences:

> [W]ith the continuing increase of immigrants 'claiming' and being 'granted' some use of their ethnic languages, there may come a time when English may have to be declared the official language so that, in case of conflict with other languages, the English text [of law] will prevail. While that is possible, it is not probable, and the possibility of English being successfully challenged [in the U.S.] seems remote.
>
> In the United States, practically all the important institutions, especially those in what I call the controlling domains of government (administrative, legislative, and judiciary); business, labor, commerce, and industry; education (especially higher education), science and technology; and the trimedia--the domains that control or dictate the language to be used, the language for 'success' or aspiration, the language of prestige and power--all use English. English is the desired language of the immigrant, so . . . the language shift to English will continue to take place. The ethnic language of immigrants can, at best, be used for special or minor purposes, like voting rights, or language for public places such as directions in public conveyances and other places, but that may be about all.
>
> By force of tradition and because of the language in the

> controlling domains, English will 'prevail.' Immigrants sooner or later (the 'later' here meaning their descendents such as second or third generation Americans) will be using English even if it is not declared an official language.(Sibayan 1986, 163)

Calvin Veltman of the University of Quebec at Montreal is the author of the definitive work on immigrants and others changing their language, Language Shift in the United States (Berlin: Mouton, 1983); excerpts from his comments provide insights from one of our most authoritative sources:

> No language group [in the United States] is successfully transmitting its language to the succeeding generation, except for Navaho. The English Language Amendment is inspired by the fear that some group, namely Hispanics, may perpetuate its language over several generations. This fear is unfounded and the ELA is therefore unnecessary. The arguments advanced by its proponents are, in my view, silly although not at all dangerous.
>
> The data show that the shift to English occurs very rapidly, spurred by the desire of immigrants and their children to be good Americans, to do well in school, to get good jobs, to do the shopping, to communicate with the neighbors, to flirt with English-speaking men and women and to carry on a host of similar social activities. If anything, assimilation to the English language group occurs more rapidly now than it did one hundred years ago (Veltman 1983: 214f.). After all, nearly 30% of Spanish-language immigrants have made English their preferred language of use (Veltman 1983: 48).
>
> Furthermore, the sociological data on language shift suggest that language statutes have relatively little impact on social

practice . . . [T]he official status of a language has little, if anything, to do with the actual maintenance or loss of minority languages. Which leads me to my principle conclusion about the potential impact of an English Language Amendment: Who cares? What real difference would it make?(Veltman 1986, 178)

. . . . . .

I do not have any difficulty explaining why at this point in time some English language chauvinists are proposing the ELA. It is the logical outcome of the characteristic intolerance of the American electorate to the presence of a large group of recent immigrants. (Veltman 1986, 178)

. . . . . .

I do not find that the rules of the American system have dramatically changed. The first rule is simple: the USA is an English-speaking country . . . While Americans are relatively tolerant of accented speech, different accents are appraised differently. A French accent is perhaps the best to have, especially if one is white, a Spanish accent among the worst. This reflects current sociological reality, where the Spanish are seen as the new yellow horde engulfing white America while the French are seen as culinarily sophisticated, well-dressed, and worldly. There are so few French immigrants that they seem exotic rather than threatening.(Veltman 1986, 179)

. . . . . .

The second rule is a corollary of the first: second languages have no value. Since English remains the imperial language of international activity at the moment, Americans feel little need

> to learn other languages.(Veltman 1986, 179)
>
> . . . . . .
>
> If Americans do not value other languages, small wonder that adolescents from minority groups do not value their mother tongues. Once they have become English-speaking, their first language no longer serves any important purpose except to communicate with parents and grandparents. Everyone knows that no self-respecting teenager spends much time doing that. Since, however, so many parents have themselves adopted English as their preferred language, some communication is nonetheless possible. . . .(Veltman 1986, 179)
>
> . . . . . .
>
> I do not find the English Language Amendment a compelling issue. The same is true of the necessity for and the nature of bilingual programs. The current situation reminds me of Prohibition, where the WASP majority attempted to teach the newcomers who was running the show (Gusfield 1964). The current movement in favor of the ELA and against maintenance programs represents the attempt of the assimilated to teach a political lesson to Hispanic immigrants. The issue is symbolic rather than substantial.(Veltman 1986, 181)

In October of 1987, AIMAV, the International Association for the Development of Cross-Cultural Communication, under sponsorship of UNESCO, held its XXII Seminar, "Human Rights and Cultural Rights" at the Universidade Federal de Pernambuco, Recife, Brazil. Under the chairmanship of Prof. Francisco Gomes de Matos, the seminar published its Recife Declaration; correspondence with Prof. Gomes de Matos suggests that the U.S. situation is partially responsible for prompting this universal declaration, portions of

of which are excerpted here:

> Asserting that linguistic rights should be acknowledged, promoted and observed, nationally, regionally, and internationally, so as to enhance and ensure the dignity and equity of all languages,
>
> Aware of the need for legislation to eliminate linguistic prejudice and discrimination, and all forms of linguistic domination, injustice and oppression, in such contexts as services to the public, the place of work, the educational system, the courtroom, and the mass media,
>
> Stressing the need to sensitize individuals, groups and States to linguistic rights, to promote positive societal attitudes toward plurilingualism and to change societal structures towards equality between users of different languages and varieties of languages,
>
> Hence, cognizant of the need to provide explicit legal guarantees for linguistic rights to individuals and groups by the appropriate bodies of the Member States of the United Nations, [the seminar] RECOMMENDS that steps be taken by the United Nations to adopt and implement a UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF LINGUISTIC RIGHTS which would require a reformulation of national, regional and international languages policies.(Gomes de Matos 1987)

David Crystal, the noted British linguist, recently had published his Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); in his Preface, Prof. Crystal commented upon the Recife Declaration:

> The plea points to the widespread occurrence of linguistic prejudice and discrimination around the world, and to the problems people face when they wish to receive special help in language learning and use.

> All people have the right to use their mother tongue, to learn a second language, to receive special treatment when suffering from a language handicap . . . but in many parts of the world, these rights are absent or inadequately provisioned. Only concentrated public attention on the issues will promote the recognition of such rights, and it is my hope that this encyclopedia will play its part in helping to develop a climate where people will sense the importance of language in the individual and in society, and act accordingly. (Crystal 1987, vii)

As we look at the comments arising from the Recife Declaration, it is somewhat comforting to know that the United States is not the only nation in the world where language rights are being debated and possibly in some instances abridged. In each Congress since 1982, the English Language Amendment has been proposed in both houses. Some of its proposers have subsequently been defeated (Marshall 1986b, 37); however, until the current Congress, the amendment went unmatched by conflicting legislation. That situation is no longer the case, for Senator John Breaux and Congressman Jimmy Hayes of Louisiana have proposed Senate Joint Resolution 114 and House Joint Resolution 232 respectively. The first section of the proposed article reads:

> The right of the people to preserve, foster, and promote their respective historic, linguistic, and cultural origins is recognized. No person shall be denied the equal protection of the laws because of culture or language. (Breaux 1987)

Now, those organizations who have opposed the English Language Amendment either by resolution or letter (EPIC EVENTS 1988, 3); for example, the National Council of Teachers of English, the Teachers of English to Speakers

of Other Languages, the Modern Language Association, the Linguistic Society of America, the League of United Latin American Citizens, and the Federation of American Cultural and Language Communities, now these organizations have not only the English Language Amendment to oppose, but the Cultural Rights Amendment to support.

There are no guarantees of language rights in the United States Constitution; language rights have arisen only through legislative and judicial interpretations of other guaranteed rights, primarily those centering on the 14th Amendment (Heath and Krasner 1986; Marshall 1986b; Gonzalez et al. 1988). Passage of the Cultural Rights Amendment would guarantee language and cultural rights for the first time, and with such a guarantee, the guestion of whether or not English should be official becomes superfluous. If U.S. English, one of the main supports along with English First and the American Ethnic Coalition of the ELA, really believes as they advertise that they support cultural rights and do not oppose the unofficial use of other languages (Cox 1987), then they will have to work as hard for the Cultural Rights Amendment as they do for the ELA.

Perhaps there is some room for compromise along these lines: "You guarantee us our language rights, and we won't object if you make English official. Pass the Cultural Rights Amendment, and we'll let you make English not only the de facto official language but the de jure official language as well. Such a compromise could dampen the conflict; in fact, it could end it!

(N.B. This paper in a different version was read as part of a seminar, "The Dangers of an Official Language Policy: A Review of Historical Perspectives and a Workshop on Current Responses," chaired by Harvey A. Daniels at the National Council of Teachers of English convention, November 22, 1987, and in this version by invitation to the Teachers of English to Students of Other Languages convention, March 9, 1988.)

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